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ABSTRACT

Student writing can be used in literature classes as a motivational and learning tool. Through careful planning, writing activities can (1) demonstrate that student ideas on literature will be considered seriously, (2) integrate students' literary opinions with those of the instructor and established critics, (3) improve student writing skills, (4) develop a class atmosphere of definite cooperation, and (5) establish criteria and procedures for evaluation of student work that relate to student performance. One plan for incorporating writing into literature classes includes dividing students into groups of six, with one student contributing a written response to a literary work each week. On a designated day, the small groups listen to the instructor for extensive comments. Certain essays may be used as large group discussion starters of literary works. In addition to increasing participation in group discussion, this method intensifies student engagement with literature. Final examinations in classes using this procedure tend to produce thoughtful, lively responses to literary works. (Questions for reader-based feedback and essay evaluation forms are appended.) (MM)

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STUDENT WRITING IN THE FOREGROUND
OF A LITERATURE CLASS

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"Every English class is a writing class." So it has often been said, yet how many literature classes really bring student writing into the foreground, making it prominent throughout the quarter or semester and drawing on it frequently for classroom discussion?

Isn't it tempting for instructors, the de facto experts in literary matters, to grab the spotlight and precede students' writing with their own remarks? Don't students often feel that whatever they say about a literary work had better correspond fairly closely with what the instructor thinks? Doesn't writing that occurs after classroom discussion of a literary text has concluded seem not to be an intrinsic part of the brew of interpretation? Why should writing be left only for the late stages, presented primarily for evaluation and read only by the instructor?

In the many years that I have taught literature classes, I have felt an increasing disparity between the teaching of writing I was doing in "writing" courses and what I was accomplishing with students' writing when our focus was principally literary. The tug of precedent was strong to design the conventional end-of-quarter term paper and to have a mid-quarter and a final exam, but that precedent seems hard to defend.

Though journals, for students who were willing to commit themselves to them, did supplement those standard writing assignments, they have drawbacks for any explicit teaching of writing skills. Assigning more frequent short essays ("opinion

papers," I once called them) seemed a possible solution. They allowed more frequent writing, at least, and probably seemed to students more like an invitation to state their own opinions about literary interpretation than does the conventional documented term paper. In classes of forty or more students, though, that many essays coming in three or four times during a quarter becomes an overwhelming task for careful reading and response.

Since I have now found a solution that comes close to being ideal, I offer it to high school and college English teachers who want to achieve the following:

- demonstrate to students that their ideas about literature will be taken seriously;
- integrate students' opinions about literary works with the instructor's and with those of other critics;
- engage students in frequent writing and revising;
- actively and explicitly teach skills of writing throughout the term;
- develop a classroom tone in which cooperation in literary inquiry is genuinely felt, where the instructor is guide rather than lecturer and holder of the last word;
- establish criteria and procedures for evaluation of student work that are perceptibly and genuinely related to students' performance in the course.

This plan will probably work best in a literature course based on the premises of what has come to be known as "reader-response criticism." These premises make each reader the formulator of responses that have potential validity and that deserve a hearing in class. They permit the inclusion of feelings about literature as well as the cerebration associated

with explication de texte. They encourage variety in response, though they also require reasoned support for response.

My students found these premises, as they were later worked out in practice, to be almost opposite those they had experienced in many previous literature classes. Several found the new premises difficult to apply, suspecting a trap or simply being unable to shift away from the conventional "objective" literary analysis. And a few over-extended the seeming freedom implied by the premises, writing journal-like responses of dubious relevance, particularly to other readers. However, the prominence given to the importance of each reader's response seems critical to fully incorporating student writing into a course with a literature title.

The plan needs to be introduced in the first two or three days of the course so that it quickly becomes an established part of class routine. Fortunately, the procedural elements can be explained quickly, and students can readily understand what is expected of them. Only later do they realize the potential depth of their engagement with the literary texts and with their formulation of responses to them.

This is the essence of the scheme:

- The class (in my case, up to fifty students) will be divided into groups of about six each, the groups to be stable in membership throughout the quarter.
- One person in each group will write a two- to three-page response to the literary work assigned for study each week.
- All students in the class will write two such "mid-quarter responses."

- Or a designated day, announced two or more weeks in advance, the students will read their responses to others in the group.
- The small group will use a guide sheet (sample appended) to focus its responses to the essay.
- The version read to the group is to be considered an early draft which will be revised, sometimes so extensively as to constitute a rewriting, after discussion by the small group.
- A more polished version, preferably typed, will be submitted to the instructor before class time of the day following the small-group reading and discussion.
- The instructor will read all the essays (only eight per week in a class of about fifty students) quickly before the next class session and will select one or more for discussion.
- The instructor will write extensive comments on each essay (preferably using an evaluation sheet containing class-developed criteria and evaluation scales, sample appended; for my explanation of this procedure, see "Evaluation of Writing with Semantic Differential Scales," ERIC 222 900), many of which deal with qualities of writing, and will encourage revision before resubmission and reevaluation.

It is also important to know that these mid-quarter responses are written before any classroom discussion has begun about the literary text under study. They are therefore "uncontaminated" by opinions uttered in class (though small-group discussion may lead to productive shifts in a writer's initial literary interpretation).

By distributing a reading schedule, subject to minor revision, I establish the expectation that students will have completed the first reading of a book or story two or three days before discussion is to start. (Assuming that the amount of reading involved seems reasonable--up to about 150 pages of fiction a week--most students seem to stick to the schedule.)

Students must also know the importance placed on these mid-quarter responses in relation to overall evaluation of their performance. I state that the final grades will be determined according to these proportions: mid-quarter responses (grades based on final revisions), 40%; discussion participation (estimated both quantitatively and qualitatively), 20%; final examination (two questions calling for essay responses, to be written at home over approximately five days), 40%.

I offer now a more detailed explanation of the elements in this teaching plan.

Having a classroom with moveable chairs is essential, both to make the small-group meetings (which occur usually once a week) physically possible and to allow a semi-circular configuration on other days when I am the discussion leader. (Getting students to discuss in a productive way, with most people actively participating, when they see only one another's backs, is nearly impossible.) It is also important that students attend regularly since there will be few lecture notes to be transmitted. I tell them that regular attendance is a minimum requirement for credit in the course, explaining that I do not have arbitrary or punitive intentions but that they will not feel genuinely involved in the course unless they are there most of the time.

Dividing the class into groups can be arbitrary; however, I ask students on a questionnaire, distributed early in the course, whether they have preferences of certain literary texts scheduled

for reading for their written responses. Where they do express such preferences, I form the groups so that they can be accommodated. Then, when class membership has stabilized after the first week or so, I make the assignments of texts and student writers for the rest of the quarter. Each student therefore knows several weeks in advance what text he or she will be writing about and when the first version of the response is due for small-group discussion.

By limiting the mid-quarter responses to two or three pages, I signal to students that they are not expected to produce full-blown term or research essays. They may use secondary critical sources if they wish, though I emphasize that the focus of the response must be their own original thought and feeling. They should not hesitate to use the word I, and they may include direct reference to their own experiences outside of but relevant to the literary text. What we want is a concise essay, sometimes in narrative form, that informs us how and why they responded to the text as they did. "This is the heart of the matter: You, as a unique reader of this text, have a unique response. What is it? Why is that response valid for you? What specific elements of the text and of your own experience give rise to that response?"

These preliminary instructions for formulating written responses become particularized and the variety they allow are revealed as we discuss students' essays. Typically, I duplicate all or parts of two or three essays during the first couple of weeks (with oral and written variations on this procedure later in the quarter) so that both ideas and writing techniques can be

discussed with the whole class. My selections of essays to duplicate, usually anonymously, are based largely on a concern for demonstrating an array of possible interpretations and not so much on interpretations that seem fully worked out or that correspond to mine. Later in the quarter, after we have established a tone of trust and openness, I ask some students to read their essays orally, with discussion to follow.

At the first presentation of each written response in the small groups, I urge at least two readings, using my duplicated "Questions for Reader-based Feedback to Mid-Quarter Responses" (appended) as a guide. These questions give some direction to the discussion and encourage more varied reactions than students typically give. The writers of each essay are sometimes directly engaged in the discussion but are often listeners rather than overt reactors. Their time for reaction comes after the full period of discussion when they set about revising their ideas and manner of expression in light of usually vigorous and often conflicting reactions. I consider this one of the crucial times for students' reflection on the effectiveness of what they have written. They can seldom avoid taking their peers' comments seriously. The potential strengths and the large and small flaws become matters for strenuous rewriting as they prepare the essay for sharing with the instructor and potentially with the whole class.

By asking that the next, more polished version reach me at least two hours before the time of the next class, I have time to read each of the eight essays (or less, depending on class

enrollment) and to select those that seem most useful for extending discussion. I look for ideas that I know will stimulate disagreement or that seem only partially thought through. Sometimes I even select the bland, conventional essay that seems very unexciting. In any case, I explain that the examples I present are not intended as models for the correct way to respond but as discussion starters. Usually, I can find at least a phrase in one of the essays that connects with one of my interpretations of the text. My purpose, after all, is not to efface myself or to pretend that I don't have ideas about the texts; it is to integrate those ideas as gracefully as possible with students' ideas, building a community of interpretation, not a consensus.

While class discussions led by me proceed, I respond in writing to each essay. Because I don't have essays from all the students, I do not feel the pressure of quantity. My comments, therefore, are quite detailed. I give suggestions for revision of content as well as technical matters, such as word choice, punctuation, and spelling. While I have not insisted on revision, I have announced a grading policy that allows for raising the grade if the essay is revised and thereby improved. My returning the essays within a day or two, while we are still discussing the book about which students wrote, seems to preserve the momentum of desire to revise. As a consequence, many students have seized the opportunity, turning in a revised essay that is often more fully developed, more coherent, and freer of surface technical errors than was the earlier draft.

Involvement of students as a result of these procedures is perceptibly great. Nearly everyone in the class contributes orally, at least during small-group meetings. On any given class day when I am discussion leader, oral comments from fifty percent or more of the class are common. Such a high level of participation, when students perceive that it arises out of their own thoughtful written responses and when it often goes beyond what they originally wrote, gives the class an exuberance and a momentum that stimulates still further involvement. Many students have expressed to me their intense desire to continue revising their mid-quarter responses as they continuously raise their expectations about quality. Time to do the revising, rather than desire, seems to be the chief limiting factor for most.

When the end of the quarter comes and I read the take-home final examination responses, I have little cause to doubt the efficacy of the writing experiences that preceded. Because the questions offer latitude for varied response and invite imaginative approaches, I have no trouble in sustaining my attention to them. Some students are still plodding; some still write laboriously or irrelevantly. But on the whole, there is a level of engagement with literature and their reactions to it that seems to grow naturally out of the previous class work. Writing has become a satisfying way of shaping response to literature.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONS FOR READER-BASED FEEDBACK TO MID-QUARTER RESPONSES

(Adapted from Peter Elbow, Writing with Power,
Oxford University Press, 1981)

- I. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading/hearing the piece of writing?
 - A. (after one or two paragraphs of the first reading)
 - What was happening to you as you read this opening passage?
 - Tell which words or phrases stuck out most or had resonance.
 - What has this section just said? What do you now expect the whole piece to say?
 - The writer has just introduced herself or himself to you. How did s/he do it? Formally? Casually? Intimately? Did s/he thrust out a hand for you to shake?
 - At this early stage, are you more with or against the writer? Dragging your feet or helping pedal?
 - B. (after the completed first reading)
 - What is happening to you now? Changes in reaction or loyalty? What's the most important thing about the piece?
 - Describe the way the writer ended the piece. As though s/he were ending a letter, saying good-bye, ending a telephone conversation? Did s/he hang up abruptly? Stand around on the porch unable to say good-bye? End with a sudden gush of warmth?
 - Which aspects of you does the piece bring out? Your motherly or fatherly helpfulness?
 - What kind of person has the writer turned out to be? How did s/he turn out differently from what you had first suspected?
 - What do you like about the piece at this point?
- II. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened. (after a complete second reading)
 - Summarize it. If you have difficulty, pretend you have only thirty seconds to tell a friend what this piece is saying. Tell him quickly and informally. Let the writer hear you fumbling to find the center of gravity.
 - Then summarize it in one sentence.
 - Then summarize it in one word, first one from the piece itself, then a word not in the piece.
 - Summarize what you feel the writer is trying but not quite managing to say. Where is the writing trying to go, perhaps against the writer's will?
 - Summarize what you wish it were saying.

III. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers. (after the summarizing responses)

- What other pieces of writing does it remind you of? What forms of writing does it remind you of: a love letter? a federal interdepartmental memo? a late night diary entry?
- Make up an image for the relationship between the writer and the reader. Does the writer seem to have an arm draped familiarly over your shoulder? Is the writer shouting from a cliff to a crowd below? Reading to you from a stage? Shaking his/her fist at you?
- Describe the writer's relationship to the reader in terms of distance. Close? At arm's length? Distant? Describe changes that occur (e.g., "backing off toward the end").
- Find words or metaphors for the voice or tone in the writing. Intimate? Shouting? Coy? Tight-lipped? Describe the voice in metaphors of color or of weather.
- Look especially for changes in the voice. Perhaps it starts out stiff and loosens up. Where do you detect that change?
- What images of the writer come to mind? Hunched over a desk? Sprawled on a couch? Sitting on a beach?
- Who does the writing seem to address? Strangers? An old friend? Dumbbells? Tough guys? Is s/he talking up or down?

APPENDIX 2

EVALUATION OF MID-QUARTER RESPONSE ESSAY

Writer

Evaluator

Criteria

Evaluative Scales

FOCUS

Provides a focus on literary interpretation

! _____ ! _____ ! _____ ! _____ !
clear ambiguous

SUPPORT

Develops support for assertions

! _____ ! _____ ! _____ ! _____ !
specific _____ vague

!_____!
convincing _____ unconvincing

! _____ ! _____ ! _____ ! _____ !
thorough _____ absent

ORGANIZATION

Has pattern of organization

!_____!_____!_____!_____!
orderly random

Flows through pattern

! _____ ! _____ ! _____ ! _____ !
coherent haphazard

VOICE

Maintains a consistent voice

! _____ ! _____ ! _____ ! _____ !
distinctive _____ confused

Achieves harmony between
voice and message

!_____!_____!_____!
congruent_____conflicting

AUDIENCE

Addresses target audience

!_____!_____!_____!_____!
 identifiable _____ obscure

FORMAT

Follows reasonable college
essay conventions

appropriate distracting
conductive to
ease of reading

COMMENTS: